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## REPORTS OF VOODOO WORSHIP IN HAYTI AND LOUISIANA.

IN an article entitled "Myths of Voodoo Worship and Child Sacrifice in Hayti," printed in the first number of this JOURNAL, reasons were given for supposing that tales respecting the excesses of the alleged sect of the Voodoos in Hayti were in fact only echoes of mediæval superstitions concerning the Vaudois. A few days before the publication of the article in question appeared the third volume of a history of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages, by Mr. H. C. Lea, in which a like derivation of the name Voodoo is incidentally set forth. Mr. Lea remarks (p. 519, note) that from *Vaudoisie*, become a designation of sorcery, has descended the word Voodooism, "descriptive of the negro sorcery of the French colonies, transmitted to the United States through Louisiana." As to the term there would seem to be no reasonable doubt, and as to the stories the correspondence is such as cannot be explained by accidental coincidence.<sup>1</sup>

Respecting the Haytian stories, I have consulted Mr. B. F. Whidden, the first minister of the United States to Hayti, who was sent at the time of the recognition of that government by the United States in order to open diplomatic relations, and who was in Port-au-Prince at the date of the events alluded to in the work of Sir Spencer St. John. Mr. Whidden is of opinion that the accounts of these events were based on popular rumor, sometimes originating in private malice. Mr. Whidden writes:—

"I was present at the trial of Jeanne Pellé, and at the execution of the nine at Port-au-Prince, February 13, 1864. It was not a fair trial; the evidence was extracted by torture. There was a report in circulation. It caused great excitement. Government took it up, and was determined to convict, because it was a seeming stain on their race. The verdict was forced."

Mr. Whidden is of opinion that, if the truth were ascertained, there would be found no more cannibalism in Hayti than in Jamaica. On the other hand, he thinks that there is no doubt concerning the existence of a Vaudoux worship and dance, which latter he has frequently seen and heard.

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the year 1460, Jean Tacquet, a rich citizen of Arras, confessed that Satan, in the witches' gathering, had reduced him to obedience, by beating him with a bull's pizzle (Lea, iii. 525). The Vaudoux priest, in Saint-Méry's account, is described as using the same instrument of correction (St. John omits this feature). If an on-looker is touched by one of the Vaudoux dancers, he is sympathetically affected, and obliged to join the dance, until he has bought his freedom (Saint-Méry, i. 50); but police officers, as Saint-Méry jestingly remarks, are exempt; so, in the Middle Age, officials who arrested the Vaudois were supposed to possess immunity from enchantment (Lea, iii. 509).

The question arises, What was this dance which was so familiar in Port-au-Prince? The orgies of the Vaudoux are represented as taking place in secret, and in remote places. It ought to be easy to obtain the words and description of a public dance, such as that familiar to Mr. Whidden.

As respects Louisiana, the accessible information is small; but the mention of Prof. Fortier, vol. i. p. 138 of this Journal, and that of Mr. Cable in an article on "Creole Slave Songs" ("Century," April, 1886), show the popular belief on the subject to resemble that in Hayti. The sect in New Orleans had a queen, who was one Marie Laveau. So in Spain, according to evidence given before the inquisitors of Logroño, Gracienne de Barrenechea was queen of the sorcerers of Zugarramurdi (Llorente, "Hist. Crit. de l'Inquis.," iii. 448). The festivals of the "Vaudous" were supposed to be annual, and to take place at a lonely spot near Lake Pontchartrain, on St. John's Eve. The same time is fixed for gatherings of European witches, who meet in lonely and remote spots (See Grimm's *Mythology*). Two gentlemen of New Orleans were present at a negro festival which they believed to be a rite of the sect ("Century," April, 1886), with what reason does not appear in the account. It is very desirable that some one should examine these beliefs, and ascertain whether any form of Voodoo worship can be substantiated in Louisiana.

I am informed by a correspondent that some respectable negroes in Northern cities still believe that such infamous rites exist, and are practised by disreputable members of their own race, even in these towns. Children are also supposed to be stolen and made away with; but the object assigned is a medical purpose: they are imagined to be used as subjects of dissection. The belief seems to indicate that cannibalism originally made part of the evil practices attributed to the "Vaudous" of Louisiana.

By far the most remarkable story respecting Voodooism in Louisiana is to be found in a French work, "*Dictionnaire Universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle*," by P. Larousse. In this encyclopædia *Vaudou* is defined as (1) "an African worship which negroes have imported into America; (2) as the god who is the object of this worship; (3) as the person who practises the worship. A narration is then given respecting the annual ceremony of the "Vaudous," which ascribes to that sect an important part in the recent history of the State. In 1863, it is stated, the society was brought before a court of New Orleans. The words of the account are curious enough; I cite in translation:—

The great annual ceremony took, this time, a particular stamp from political events, and a great number of negroes, informed of the day on

which it was to take place, resolved, either in the assemblies of an inferior order or in private meetings, to devote themselves to the invocations and superstitious practices prescribed by the chief priestess. But there had been indiscretions, and the police was well informed. On the day appointed, at ten o'clock in the evening, eight police officers unexpectedly entered the inviolable sanctuary, and found themselves in the presence of fifty women in the costume of our mother Eve, of whom two only were white, the latter, as it appears, well known in New Orleans. These were executing at that moment, with frenzy, the dance of the Vaudous, while the great priestess devoted herself to invocations peculiar to the old superstition which counts so many adepts among the peoples of Africa, whence it has spread into the New World. In the middle of the hall, says the police report, "was a vase, of which the contents were at least as varied as those of the caldron of Macbeth, a mixture in part composed of nameless substances." Around the vase, on three dishes of silver, many snakes carelessly reared their heads. The whole was surrounded by many hundred candles, and in the four quarters of the hall burned on hearths stimulating perfumes.

The report goes on to state that twenty persons were arrested, and appeared before "La Cour Prévôtale" on the 30th of July. Two thousand negroes and as many negresses crowded the approaches to the court. The case was brought up again on August 6th, and completed on the 8th. . . . The chief burden of the accusation depended on the testimony of an officer, who affirmed that the meetings had a seditious and secessionist character. All the proofs, on the contrary, went to show that the high dignitaries of the "Vaudous" had contributed powerfully to the maintenance of tranquillity.

The prisoners were discharged with an admonition, which action gives the reporter an opportunity to laud the respect for personal liberty and the rights of conscience observed in the United States.

The source of this improbable story is not mentioned; the inventor of it may have been a correspondent of a French journal, who amused himself by imposing on the credulity of his readers. New Orleans was in the hands of Federal authority; "La Cour Prévôtale" must have been the provost marshal's court. I have not been able to obtain any information on the subject. If the narrative has any foundation, perhaps this publication may bring light.

Where human testimony is so deceptive, it is natural to regard the evidence of language. In an African superstition, one would expect the survival of some African words or phrases. Such survival has been supposed to exist in a word, *wanga*, which in Hayti is "a generic name for poisons, philters, and charms" (St. John, Hayti, p. 221). It is also applied to incantations (p. 210). *Ouangan* in Louisiana is a term for a charm (Cable, "Grandissimes," pp. 134, 340), and *ouanga* means to bewitch (p. 240). Now this word, so African

in appearance, is neither more nor less than the French *onguent*, Latin *unguentum*, ointment. In antiquity, when anointing was a practice of the toilet, it played a great part in medicine, and naturally in sorcery. Thus, Apuleius ("Metamorph.," lib. iii. 138, 139) relates how the sorceress Pamphile kept in her store-chest (*arcula*) certain boxes (*pixides*) containing ointments (*unguedo, unctum*), one of which had the virtue of turning her into an owl. Apuleius, out of curiosity, wished to try the experiment, but got hold of the wrong box, and was metamorphosed into a donkey. The manner of using the ointment was to remove the garments, and apply by rubbing in. In 1324, Dame Alice Kyteler was found to possess powders and ointments (*unguenta*) which she kept in her chests (*cistæ*) in boxes (*pixides*), by means of which she had infatuated or reduced to infirmity her two husbands (Wright, "Proceedings against Dame Alice Kyteler," Camden Soc., 1843, p. 2). Another account states that with these ointments she anointed the staves on which she and her friends flew through the air (p. 47). The French word *Onguent* continues to be used in the same manner. In modern Breton folktales, magicians employ their ointments (*Onguents*) to heal wounds, reawaken the dead, and calm stormy waters, in short, to do all their predecessors could do. (See Luzel, "Contes pp. de la Basse-Bretagne," Paris, 1887.) As these enchantments had always been accompanied with muttered invocations, *ointment* and to *anoint* might become general terms for witchcraft; and it only remained that the name, mispronounced, queerly spelt, and its origin forgotten, should be regarded as a relic of African barbarism, and as indicating that knowledge of dangerous and strange herbs which was ascribed to African sorcerers.

On the other hand, a word used in Louisiana, mentioned by Mr. Cable in "The Grandissimes," is *grigri*, to bewitch. *Gris-gris* is employed in Senegal, as a general name for amulets, of which there are many kinds ("Mélusine," March, 1888, p. 57). The term is therefore African.

In "Mélusine," September, 1888, M. Gaidoz, noticing the explanation of the rites of the Vaudoux as echoes of French superstitions respecting the Vaudois, as proposed in the first number of this Journal, objects that the feature of serpent worship attributed to the former is certainly African. I consider, however, that this trait is a literary addition to the popular belief, resting on nothing better than the account of Saint-Méry, written a century ago. The manner in which this tale may have originated is easy to understand. In the European accounts, the Devil takes the form of a goat, ape, or lamb. In the Haytian, he is endowed with the shape of a snake, because that form was supposed to be natural to African negroes. However,

while cannibalism, licentiousness, etc., are universally ascribed to the alleged sect, I do not find that serpent worship is supposed to be part of their rites, except in the apocryphal narratives, which, like those above alluded to, seem to be merely repetitions of the French relation. Thus has invention the power to propagate itself by perpetual repetition, until it comes to be regarded as a matter of course, and furnishes its own evidence.

M. Gaidoz further remarks that tales of cannibalism, in connection with witchcraft, are common to many countries. This is undoubted; but there is a difference between the reports of such usages among savages, by whom the custom is really practised, as for example, among tribes of British Columbia, as related by Dr. Boas (vol. i. p. 49), and like reports in civilized lands, where such habits are at present mythical. It appears to me that the peculiar stamp of the Haytian tales indicates that they belong to the latter class. It is not supposed that negroes, being free of superstitions of their own, learned them from the whites, but simply that they so far changed their native beliefs as to adopt the particular form of belief respecting witchcraft which they found in vogue among the whites.

The actual occurrence of these crimes is indeed a question of evidence; but the possible mythical explanation renders it necessary to scrutinize evidence. Now the stories respecting the alleged sect are nothing but collections of popular beliefs, to which, as above stated, the collectors have probably added something of their own, which was never included in popular belief. The reports which diplomats in Hayti wrote to their governments are only based on such current rumors.

Whatever opinion may be entertained about the worship, which I consider as probably imaginary, there can be no doubt concerning the habitual practice, even at the present day in the United States, of sorcery under the name of Voodooism. In a subsequent article I shall give some account of the nature and extent of this practice.

Since the preceding paragraphs were written my attention has been called to a new story of Vaudoux excesses quite in the line of the tales, of which an account has been given in the first number of this Journal. According to a correspondent of the "*Allgemeine Zeitung*" of Munich, writing under date of Port-au-Prince, July 12, 1888, the recent fall of President Salomon was owing to the political influence of the Vaudoux priests. Two negroes had consulted a priest as to the manner in which they might become rich. The latter advised them to kill and eat their mother. This the pair proceeded to do, strangled the old woman, made a feast, and, with the addition of horrors not necessary to detail, devoured her. The criminals being denounced by one of the invited guests, the President

caused the priest and the two principals to be shot, the other cannibals going free. Hence the hostility to Salomon. The correspondent adds: "This incident is unfortunately not isolated in our beautiful country. Such cases occur every month, and you can imagine what a state of things exists."

Dr. W. Joest, of Berlin, being interested in researches of this sort, made inquiry of an acquaintance in Hayti, who for many years has occupied "a high German official position, and has become thoroughly acquainted with the country and the people." Dr. Joest communicates the answer to the "Internationales Archiv für Ethnologie" (vol. i. No. 6, p. 233), of which he is a collaborateur. His correspondent replies that the whole relation is *verlogenes Machwerk*; as we should say, made out of whole cloth. The fall of Salomon had nothing to do with the Vaudoux; the last Vaudoux process was the well-known trial of 1863, above alluded to. As the gentleman in question is a German, perhaps more regard will be paid to this denial than is usually vouchsafed to such contradictions, the common reply being that the Haytian officials are themselves in league with the alleged sect. It is difficult to endure without indignation the repetition of monstrous fables which are only echoes of mediæval superstition, and the result of which, unless the Haytians, however faulty, were in this respect wiser than their European critics, would be the judicial murder of hundreds of innocent persons.

Dr. Joest adds that remnants of heathenism still exist in Hayti, though he does not believe that the ceremonies are accompanied with cannibalism. On the other hand, the sacrifice of cocks and goats, according to him, is still in full vigor, and such nocturnal gatherings are held even in the immediate vicinity of Port-au-Prince. "To learn anything authentic respecting the particulars of this worship," he says, "is impossible, at least it has proved so to me."

It must be remembered, however, that in France similar nightly gatherings are still attributed to the *Vaudoué* (see vol. i. p. 19 of this Journal; also the "Gloss. du Morvan"). Very likely veritable remains of African worship may be, here and there, mixed up with the mythical Vaudoux ritual; but better evidence than popular report must be adduced to prove this. When it is considered how many confederates must be involved in the existence of a hierarchy and a worship, it seems extremely improbable that the supposed secret order of the Vaudoux rests on any basis of fact.

Within the last few weeks, the state of diplomatic relations between the United States and Hayti having called attention to the matter, reports similar to the German fiction above mentioned have abounded in American newspapers. For example, a correspondent of the New York "Tribune" writes from Port-au-Prince, December

30, 1888 : " Without law, life or property is unsafe in this section. Excesses of every kind are the rule. The horrid cannibalistic rites of Voodooism are revived, and reports reach this city of a meeting of several thousand Haytians Christmas night near Jacmel, and the sacrifice of a young girl and the greedy scramble for some portion of the half-cooked flesh."

The particulars of these relations contain nothing new or calculated to add force to the reports. The correspondent of the " Mail and Express " of New York, February 1, having interviewed a Protestant clergyman in Port-au-Prince, a person of color, said to be a bishop, communicates *in extenso* the account of the latter. Hayti contains 4,000 Protestants, 50,000 Catholics, the rest of the population follow Voodooism, with its cannibalistic rites. To describe these rites, the preacher can find nothing more original than to repeat the eternally echoing account of Saint-Méry. L'égitimé himself is in favor of this heathen religion. The remedy is for the American public to educate a few of the natives. It never seems to occur to the clergyman that a large proportion of the Roman Catholic priesthood of Hayti is educated in France. The correspondent's moral is that the United States ought to step in, and give Hayti a stable government. A day afterwards, the son of his informant publicly declared these stories fabulous !

It will be understood that the scepticism of the writer is based entirely on considerations of evidence. *A priori*, the frequency of cannibalism in Hayti, if true, would not be surprising, considering its prevalence in Africa. Neither would the existence of a religion, whose chief sacrament was based on the partaking of human flesh, be impossible, considering that such secret associations are reported to exist in some African states. The Folk-lore of Europe, from pre-Christian times to the present day, abounds in reference to the power of mystic rites, the validity of which consists in banqueting on human victims. It is very probable that such traditions are the survival of extensive prehistoric practice. But the negro, when brought in contact with whites, assimilates with amazing rapidity the ideas and beliefs of the latter. Whether cannibalism exists in Hayti is a question, not of presumption, but of testimony. Up to the present time, the nature of that testimony is such as to discredit the accusation. That intelligent and trustworthy persons thoroughly familiar with the island have been unable to discover any trace of cannibal or Voodooistic rites is in itself a very strong ground for believing that these have their seat only in the imagination of a credulous people, who are affected by ideas respecting witchcraft, in which remains of African belief strangely mingle with the mediæval European superstitions derived from French immigrants.

*W. W. Newell.*